

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SCHOOL SYSTEM  
20/20

**BACK FROM THE BRINK**  
**LAWRENCE, MA**

How a Bold Vision and a Focus on Resources Can Drive System Improvement



20/20 SUCCESS STORY

MARCH 2015

# Lawrence Turnaround Actions at a Glance

The Lawrence leadership team has undertaken reforms in three phases roughly coinciding with the three years of the effort to date. Key actions are summarized below, organized by School System 20/20 transformation area.

## LEADERSHIP



## TEACHING



## SCHOOL DESIGN



## SCHOOL SUPPORT



PHASE I ACTIONS				
<b>Immediate Actions</b>	<p>Get the right people in key positions and hold them accountable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fill key central office positions with local and national knowledge</li> <li>• Replace 35 percent of principals</li> </ul>	<p>Lay foundation for long-term structural changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement new evaluation system</li> <li>• Recruit high-quality staff that shares vision</li> <li>• Replace lowest eight percent of performers</li> <li>• Begin dialogue with teachers and union</li> </ul>	<p>Launch district-driven interventions to increase time and attention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan to implement data coaching with Achievement Network (ANet) in selected schools</li> <li>• Contract with Match Education for math tutoring in two high schools</li> <li>• Strengthen high school dropout prevention</li> </ul>	<p>Focus support on Level 4 schools with redesign plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring in external non-profit operators for three Level 4 schools</li> <li>• Develop redesign plans for remaining Level 4 schools</li> <li>• Fund transition with Race to the Top and School Redesign Grants</li> </ul>
PHASE II ACTIONS				
<b>Targeted Supports and Enabling Conditions</b>	<p>Continue to strengthen school and district leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase principal salaries</li> <li>• Replace an additional 20 percent of principals</li> <li>• Create a district redesign office</li> </ul>	<p>Improve the teacher Value Proposition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new teacher leadership roles</li> <li>• Develop new compensation and career ladder plan</li> <li>• Continue to recruit high performers and exit underperformers</li> </ul>	<p>Add Acceleration Academies and plan for ELT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch vacation Acceleration Academies</li> <li>• Support school planning for ELT partnership with National Center on Time and Learning (NCTL)</li> </ul>	<p>Expand support to more schools and free resources to sustain reforms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand reach of non-profit operators and innovative school models</li> <li>• Cut central office by 30 percent and move \$1.6 million to school level</li> <li>• Provide more effective central support for schools</li> </ul>
PHASE III ACTIONS				
<b>Empowering Schools</b>	<p>Continue to increase flexibility and support for schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement "Open Architecture" model</li> <li>• Codify "Four Pillars" of LPS student experience</li> <li>• Continue to strengthen LPS leadership team</li> <li>• Establish Lawrence Partnership Council</li> </ul>	<p>Increase opportunities for teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase school empowerment and flexibility through teacher leadership teams</li> <li>• Improve school-based working conditions</li> <li>• Implement Master and Advanced teaching roles</li> </ul>	<p>Add learning time and expand proven interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add 200+ hours of instruction to all K-8 schools</li> <li>• Expand ANet and Acceleration Academies</li> <li>• Continue tutoring</li> </ul>	<p>Formalize planning support for all schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement comprehensive school planning process</li> <li>• Provide curated list of service providers</li> <li>• Move additional \$5 million from central office to schools</li> </ul>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Back from the Brink

## *How a Bold Vision and a Focus on Resources Can Drive System Improvement*

*This case study uses the framework School System 20/20 to examine how the Lawrence Public Schools is transforming its policies and structures to better align resources with student and teacher needs.*

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## School System 20/20: Tools for District Transformation

Through more than a decade of partnering with urban school districts nationwide, ERS has identified a set of conditions and practices that enable districts to achieve significant improvements in school and system performance. We distilled these insights into **School System 20/20**.

School System 20/20 includes both a vision for transformative change as well as a methodology for charting a path and measuring progress toward that change across seven transformation areas: Standards and Instruction, Teaching, Leadership, School Design, School Support, Funding, and Partners. Using a data-driven approach, it enables districts to see exactly how resources—*people, time, and money*—are deployed, and identify where they can better meet student and teacher needs. The goal is to organize system resources so that every school succeeds for every student.

School System 20/20 assessment tools help district leaders measure and track the conditions for change and their resource allocation across seven areas. Based on our experience working with districts, on our extensive district database, and on published research, the tools use qualitative and quantitative metrics to evaluate districts. This Lawrence story is the first in a series that explores system transformation through the School System 20/20 lens.

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## Lawrence: An Emerging Turnaround Success

In 2011, Lawrence Public Schools (LPS), a mid-sized urban district of 12,800 students—87 percent of whom lived in poverty—and 28 schools, was widely recognized as among the most troubled school systems in Massachusetts. LPS ranked among the bottom one percent of districts in the state both in terms of math and ELA proficiency on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) as well as graduation rate, which was just 52 percent. Accordingly, in November 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to place the district under state receivership.

Under the guidance of Receiver Jeffrey C. Riley, the LPS team developed and implemented an aggressive turnaround plan that focused not just on programmatic changes, but also on creating enabling conditions at the district level for each school to succeed—an approach they call “Open Architecture.” This comprehensive initiative was designed to create a new kind of school system and to ensure that district resources of *people, time, and money* are fully leveraged to maximize student learning.

By June 2014, the picture in Lawrence had changed dramatically. Through strong leadership, a bold vision for a new kind of school system, and a laser focus on effective use of resources, LPS achieved impressive results including:

- Significant gains in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above in math on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), **from 28 percent to 41 percent**, and more moderate gains in ELA from 41 percent to 44 percent.
- Impressive gains in MCAS student growth percentiles (SGPs), a measure of how much students’ scores increased compared to other students’ scores with similar starting points. **In math, there was a 17-point increase, from 40 to 57**, and in ELA, there was a nine-point increase, from 43 to 52.
- A dramatic improvement in the high school graduation rate, from **52 percent in 2011 to 67 percent in 2014**. At the same time, dropout rate decreased from 8.6 percent to 4.6 percent.

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## A Three-Phased Approach

District leaders were deliberate in sequencing their actions to move the needle quickly for students while creating the system-level conditions to enable schools to drive sustainable transformation across three phases:

- **Phase I: Immediate Actions** (*Spring 2012*) – Initiate programs designed to have an immediate impact on student outcomes and lay the foundation for significant change.
- **Phase II: Targeted Supports and Enabling Conditions** (*SY 2012–13*) – Implement programs designed in Phase I and begin to build new systems and structures to enable lasting improvement at every school.
- **Phase III: Empowering Schools** (*SY 2013–14 and beyond*) – Based on a belief that the school must be the unit of change, expand support and flexibility to enable schools to make decisions that best meet their students’ needs.

Lawrence leadership realized that short-term, programmatic actions were not enough to build the foundations for lasting change. Their plan explicitly included the goal of changing district conditions to enable schools to make changes to meet their students’ needs. The LPS strategy was comprehensive, spanning all seven School System 20/20 transformation areas but focused primarily on:

- **Leadership:** Ensuring all schools have effective leaders, providing them the flexibility and support to meet the needs of their students and teachers and holding them accountable for improving student outcomes.
- **Teaching:** Attracting, developing, and retaining high-quality teaching staff through aggressive recruiting and hiring, limited exiting of the lowest performers, and a new teacher contract giving teachers more school-level control and leadership opportunities.
- **School Design:** Implementing programmatic and structural changes and organizing school resources to provide excellent teaching and personalized learning and support (including increased instructional time and individual attention) for all students.
- **Support:** Partnering with each school to provide support and flexibility, as well as funding and external partner resources it needs.

There were also several themes that wove throughout the reform actions in Lawrence:

1. Lawrence’s **Open Architecture** approach aimed to differentiate school designs based on the needs of the students and staff in each school. “(The) model provides broad autonomy for schools that are excelling and more intensive interventions for those schools that are not.”<sup>1</sup>
2. While receivership provided Superintendent Riley with an unprecedented level of autonomy, and while he did make significant changes in personnel at all levels, his first priority was to leverage the talent already in the district. From teachers to central office administrators, the LPS team identified strong performers and placed them in leadership positions. At the same time, they replaced staff where it was necessary and brought in numerous external hires to fill open positions and to bring needed expertise. Although Riley could have unilaterally imposed a new contract, instead, **LPS and Lawrence Teachers Union leadership worked closely together** to develop a contract that was approved by union membership.
3. The district leadership was aggressive in **leveraging external partners** to provide specialized expertise or programs for which the district could not quickly develop in-house capacity. This included the unusual step of recruiting proven external, non-profit school operators with experience running urban schools to step in and take over two of Lawrence’s Level IV schools and to set up a new alternative high school program.

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## Encouraging Results

The Lawrence Public Schools have made remarkable gains in just two years. Both student proficiency on MCAS and graduation rates have improved significantly. While some of this improvement has been the result of programmatic interventions such as tutoring and Acceleration Academies, the

1. [https://www.lawrence.k12.ma.us/users/0files/flyers/Our\\_Way\\_Forward\\_2.pdf](https://www.lawrence.k12.ma.us/users/0files/flyers/Our_Way_Forward_2.pdf)

# School System 20/20 Report Card

This chart summarizes progress made by Lawrence between 2011 (pre-receivership) and 2014 as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tools.

		SYSTEM STRUCTURES AND POLICIES		PRACTICE AND RESOURCE USE	
		2011	2014	2011	2014
STANDARDS AND INSTRUCTION	Curriculum			N/A	N/A
	Formative Assessments				
	Instructional Practice				N/A
TEACHING	Defining/Measuring Effectiveness				
	Hiring & Assignment				
	Compensation & Career Path				
	Professional Growth				
SCHOOL DESIGN	Capacity			N/A	N/A
	Flexibility			N/A	N/A
	Instructional Time				
	Individual Attention				
	Teaching Effectiveness	N/A	N/A		
	Special Populations				
LEADERSHIP	Defining/Measuring Effectiveness				
	Career Path & Compensation			N/A	N/A
	Professional Growth				
SCHOOL SUPPORT	School Evaluation & Support				
	Integrated Data				
	Service Quality & Efficiency	N/A	N/A		
	Turnaround	N/A	N/A		
FUNDING	Equity				
	Transparency			N/A	N/A
	Portfolio			N/A	N/A
PARTNERS	Community Resources				
	Family Engagement			N/A	N/A

district has also made significant progress in creating the conditions for sustainable, school-level change. This in turn has begun to drive shifts in resource use. These shifts are reflected in the chart on the previous page, which shows “before” and “after” LPS School System 20/20 rating.

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## Lessons from Lawrence

The Lawrence experience reveals important lessons that other districts can learn from as they undertake this difficult work:

- **Balance quick wins with structural change.** The centralized, programmatic interventions implemented in Phases I and II sent a clear message and made a meaningful difference for students. But district leaders understood that the only way to ensure sustainable improvement was to radically change the culture and the underlying systems and structures in schools and in the district. This balance between quicker interventions and the longer-term, more complex work of removing barriers to change is relevant to any district working to improve.
- **Reform is scalable.** While LPS is a relatively small urban district (only 33 schools), even the largest districts can likely make the same kind of changes in a subset of schools. The key is to use that success to pave the way for broadening those changes to other schools.
- **Collaboration is crucial.** The authority Jeff Riley enjoyed as a receiver allowed him to move quickly without the approval of his board or district unions. However, it is important to note that ultimately the teachers’ contract was a negotiated agreement ratified by the union membership and that teacher survey results reveal increased satisfaction with many aspects of the teaching job in Lawrence. “A lot of people were blaming teachers,” Riley said. “The thing I’m most proud of is fundamentally, we decided to do this with people and not to people.”<sup>2</sup> Looking broadly at the teacher value proposition and focusing on meeting student needs can provide common ground on which to build.
- **Assessing system conditions and practices helps inform decisions.** The LPS team had a clear vision of what they were trying to accomplish. Understanding how existing structures and policies in the system were supporting or constraining the realization allowed them to prioritize actions. Districts can use this type of objective assessment to build the case for the more difficult, systemic changes, and continuing to assess both system conditions and system- and school-level practice can allow them to sustain momentum for improvement.

The gains in student achievement that LPS has achieved in such a short time are a testament to the vision and commitment of everyone in the district as well as their partners. They have shown that a clear plan focused on the needs of students and backed up by deliberate actions targeting key transformation levers can have significant positive impacts on students, on schools, and on communities.

2. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/09/18/overhaul-lawrence-schools-showing-results/t9YT99J7JRqleixF9Q7IDJ/story.html>

## The School System 20/20 Vision

### From this:

### To this:

#### STANDARDS

Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively.



Rigorous, information-age standards with effective curricula, instructional strategies, and assessments to achieve them.

#### TEACHING

Isolated job, limited opportunities for growth or teaming, and career and compensation paths unconnected to performance or contribution.



Selective hiring, development, and strategic assignment to schools and teams. Career path and compensation enable growth and reward contribution.

#### SCHOOL DESIGN

A one-size-fits-all learning environment with rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate different learning needs.



Schools with restructured teams and schedules; personalized learning and support that responds to student needs and promotes instructional collaboration.

#### LEADERSHIP

Limited autonomy, flexibility, and support that do little to develop and reward strong leadership.



Clear standards and accountability with the support school leaders need to succeed.

#### SCHOOL SUPPORT

Central office focused on compliance and oversight rather than productive partnerships with schools.



A central office that serves as a strategy partner, leveraging data to increase efficiency and identify best practices.

#### FUNDING

Wide funding variances across schools, even after adjusting for differences in student needs.



Systems that allocate resources—people, time, and money—equitably, according to student and school needs.

#### PARTNERS

Schools struggling to provide the full range of social, emotional, health, and other services.



Partnering with families, community institutions, youth service organizations, and online instructors to serve students' needs.

**Education Resource Strategies (ERS)** is a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming how urban school systems organize resources—people, time, and money—so that every school succeeds for every student.

The School System 20/20 assessment tools help district leaders understand whether their district policies, structures, and practices create the conditions for improving student performance at scale—and how well their resources are aligned with the areas most critical to improving student outcomes.

To learn more, visit [ERStrategies.org/system2020](http://ERStrategies.org/system2020) or call us at 617.607.8000.